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"The King's English" or "The Complete Letter Writer"

(The original source of this material was an out-of-print book by James F. Grady, formerly of USDA, and Milton Hall, entitled "Writing Effective Government Letters." Dr. W. B. White, Chief of the Food Division, arranged it in this form for circulation among workers in Food and Drug Administration, Federal Security Agency, in early 1945. -- Editor of USDA.)

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In April 1944, the Social Security Board issued an extremely wise and witty little circular entitled "Writing." The supply to outside bureaus was limited, but a copy was sent to each District for general circulation. I feel, however, that all of our letter- or report-writing personnel will want to read it and apply its sound principles; and if they do, it is sure to generate the will to improve, condense, and clarify their writing style - something the best of us need. As Graves and Hodge say (in their excellent and recent book, "The Reader Over Your Shoulder"), by way of comment on one of their axioms of good writing:

"Every word or phrase should be appropriate to its context. This is a counsel of perfection. No writer of English can be sure of using exactly the right words even in a simple context, and even after twenty or thirty years of self-education. But he should at least act on the assumption that there is always an exactly right word, or combination of words, for his purpose -- which he will gratefully recognize as such if it happens to occur to him; and that, though he may not always find the right word, he can at least learn by experience to avoid the quite wrong, and even the not quite wrong, ones."

And speaking of other splendid books on the subject, themselves examples of excellent writing styles, Fowler's "Dictionary of Modern English Usage" belies its name in being really a collection of little essays, bristling with wit, wisdom, and tolerance, on every conceivable angle and fault of usage. Another excellent and felicitous text is that of Quiller-Couch, mentioned below.*

Let me now without further ceremony present a condensation of the pamphlet, including its excellent and ironic "Ten Ways to Make it Hard for Your Stenographer to Serve You," with the hope that it will make you as self-conscious of your literary faults, and as eager to do your utmost to correct them, as it did me.

I. Letter Appraisal Chart

Before appraising a letter, be sure to determine its exact purpose. What response is desired from the addressee?

Is the letter:

1. Complete

- a. Does it give all information necessary to accomplish its purpose?
- b. Does it answer fully all the questions, asked or implied?

2. Concise

- a. Does the letter include only the essential facts?
- b. Are the ideas expressed in the fewest words consistent with clearness, completeness, and courtesy; have irrelevant details and un-

necessary repetition been eliminated?

*"On the Art of Writing" by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, 1916.

3. Clear

- a. Is the language adapted to the vocabulary of the addressee?
- b. Do the words exactly express the thought?
- c. Is the sentence structure clear?
- d. Is each paragraph one complete thought unit?
- e. Are the paragraphs arranged in proper sequence; are the ideas presented in the most effective order?

4. Correct

- a. Is the accuracy of all factual information beyond question?
- b. Are all statements in strict conformity with policies?
- c. Is the letter free from: (1) grammatical errors, (2) spelling errors, (3) misleading punctuation?

5. Appropriate in Tone

- a. Is the tone calculated to bring about the desired response?
- b. Is the letter free from antagonistic words or phrases?
- c. Is it free from hackneyed or stilted phrases which may amuse or irritate the addressee?
- d. Does the entire letter evidence a desire to cooperate fully?

6. Neat and Well Set Up

Will a favorable first impression be created by: (1) freedom from strikeouts and obvious erasures; (2) even typing; (3) position on page?

Is the Letter Appropriate in Tone?

Put yourself in the place of the addressee and ask, "How will he feel when he reads this letter? Will it move him to the desired response?" Do your letters cause readers to react like this:

That's a fair request; I'll do it now.

It certainly is wonderful to have Government agencies so agreeable and helpful.

The people in the X Division always give good service.

They couldn't give me what I wanted, but they were mighty decent about it anyway.

or like this:

The parasites, who do they think are paying their salaries?

More Government red tape.

I guess they can wait for what they want.

Those Washington chair-warmers think they know it all.

Inappropriate tone usually is not an expression of anger or annoyance; it is unintentional and results from our failure to consider "how it will sound" to the addressee. The excerpts reprinted below illustrate how easily an inappropriate tone can creep in. The letters and memoranda from which these excerpts are taken did not gain the desired response. A number of them caused, as might be expected, considerable trouble.

Arbitrary: We do not see fit to change the procedure as you propose . . .

Indifferent: The responsibility for administering the Blank State law belongs to the Blank agency. The Social Security Board is concerned only when the matter affects the Federal social security laws.

Grudging: We have to advise that you may defer this action. Benefits are not payable to an insured worker until he reaches age 65 and is otherwise qualified.

Flatly contradictory: Mr. Brown, whom you recommended for appointment, is not qualified for the position.

Insulting: Frankly your contention is so ridiculous that we are completely at a loss to understand it. It seems perfectly evident that you were confused. . .

Commanding: You are to keep your social security card with you . . . You should write to or call at that office as we instructed you in the letter of August 24.

Forward all bids received, together with a detailed report, to this office immediately.

Petulant and selfish: You have caused us a great deal of trouble by your failure to answer our letters.

Impertinent: Do you actually mean what you state in your last sentence?

Weak and apologetic: We regret the necessity of again calling your attention to this matter . . .

Thanking you to allow this important matter to command your immediate attention, we are . . .

Tactless: Your statement about the treatment you received from one of our employees is indeed surprising because we instruct all our employees to be civil, kindly, and thoughtful, even under the most trying circumstances.

Offensive: You misunderstood the statement in our letter of November 25.

Talking down: From the information contained in your letter, we infer you have reference to . . .

It is possible you have reference to the unemployment compensation program . . .

Implied criticism: Your undated letter . . .

Your unsigned letter . . .

If your inquiry is prompted by a specific question, we are sure that the regional office will be glad to assist you.

Implied doubt: You claim that you did not receive the statement.

Many writers weaken (or even hide) what they have to say with overcautious, "Caspar Milquetoast" language. Overuse of passive voice and impersonal expressions -- "it would appear," "it is deemed advisable," "your attention is invited," "it is not too clear," "it is observed," "it is recommended," "it is our understanding" -- weaken tone by giving the reader the impression the writer is hedging, evading responsibility for his opinions, decisions, or actions, or avoiding taking a stand at all. Following are some extreme (and true) examples:

The possibility of the matter being explored, tentatively

Apparently, it is beginning to appear that . . .

Question was raised regarding the possibility of . . .

A discussion was had with Mr. Jones relative to . . .

No encouragement was given to the idea of . . .

It is believed that some plan should be begun . . .

Consideration of this plan is suggested.

It is suggested that the voucher be rewritten with the explanation that official business was performed.

II. Planning The Letter

Key Points in Planning the Letter

Analyze the incoming message carefully.--The necessity for analyzing the incoming letter or other message and any relevant previous correspondence may seem too obvious to mention. Yet failure to do this often causes incomplete or confusing replies. We give only partial answers to questions. We overlook implied questions. We may even miss the point of the incoming letter entirely. As a result there is delay in getting the desired information to our correspondent, and a series of letters have to be written when one might have done.

Get a mental photograph of the reader.--Put yourself in the place of the representative in the field, the citizen in Oshkosh, the division chief in Washington, the State official, so that you will be able to direct your message to his needs, in an appropriate tone and in words that he will readily understand. As expressed by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in *The Art of Writing*: ". . . the business of writing demands two--the author and the reader. Add to this what is equally obvious, the obligation of courtesy rests first with the author, who invites the seance. . . What follows, but that in speaking or writing we have an obligation to put ourselves into the hearer's or reader's place? It is his comfort, his convenience, we have to consult."

Acknowledgment of Incoming Letter

As a general rule, your letter will be strengthened by subordinating the reference to the incoming letter and by beginning with information of interest to the addressee. Sometimes, however, it is both convenient and desirable to have the opening paragraph include only an acknowledgment of the incoming letter and identification of its subject matter. Occasionally it is difficult to begin in any other way, and the effort to do so results only in lost time and in an artificial and labored opening.

Your Closing Paragraph

The closing paragraph is strategic because it leaves the final impression. Its function is to summarize the central thought, especially when the letter is long, and to indicate clearly the action which the addressee should take. Its tone is of particular importance, because the closing paragraph should reinforce the previous statements in the letter and should stimulate the addressee to act as the writer wishes him to act.

III. The Language of The Letter

Obsolete Phrases or "Hoop Skirts"

Some correspondents are still addicted to stilted and obsolete phrases which, together with sideburns and hoop skirts were in vogue generations ago, such as "Your kind favor of the 15th has come to hand." "Kindly (or please) be advised that" usually precedes simple and otherwise complete statements such as "your application should be sent directly to this office."

The chief objection to these outmoded phrases is that they weaken the letter. It is a basic requirement of effective letter writing that the mind of the reader should be allowed to proceed from the salutation to the signature without interruption. Phraseology is part of the form of a letter, and a good writer subordinates the form to the message. We should use language that clarifies and strengthens the effect we wish to produce. Obsolete phrases have reached the retirement age; they deserve a permanent rest.

Other Overworked, Stereotyped Phrases

Closely related to the "hoop skirts" carried over from past generations are a great number of dead-weight phrases which by constant repetition have lost all sparkle and have come to be known as "bromides." Whatever they are called, these trite, stereotyped expressions reduce a letter's effectiveness. Although "hoop skirts" may amuse the reader, "bromides" merely put him to sleep. Here are a few examples:

The contents of your letter have been carefully noted . . .

(We read all incoming letters carefully)

Please be advised that we are giving this matter the most careful consideration.

(Even if we are, he won't believe it. He has heard that one too many times before.)

For your information . . .

(Usually superfluous.)

This will acknowledge receipt of your letter . . .

(If we answer his letter, he will know that it was received.)

By return mail . . .

At your earliest convenience . . .

(Ho hum.)

We wish to advise that . . .

(Omit the windup; he'll be interested in the advice, or better still, the information you send him.)

Please be advised that . . .

(Another unnecessary windup.)

We return same to Mr. B.

(Use "it" for singular reference; "them" for plural reference.)

With kindest regards . . .

Under separate cover . . .

"Stuffed Shirts"

The wish to have the pompous, silk-hatted gentleman slip on a banana peel is almost universal; readers feel the same way about correspondents who write in a pompous, high-hat style. Pretentiousness creates antagonism toward the writer and the institution he represents. Some correspondents adopt a style of this kind because they believe it adds dignity, not realizing that the essence of dignity is simplicity. Correspondents who themselves are far from pompous merely fall into the habit of using high-sounding phrases in their letters. As one correspondent put it, "I've always thought that in your letter you were supposed to use a style of language different from that used in talking."

The man who wrote, "A letter dated December 11 emanating in this office apparently crossed yours in the mail, and we believe that it will answer most of the questions propounded in your letter of the same date," would have made a much better impression if he had said, "We believe that our letter of December 11 answers most of the questions asked in your letter of the same date."

Technical Terms

Certain expressions are peculiar to each profession or occupational group and may be used in communications between members of the same group. For example, it is correct and even advisable for one attorney or other professional man to use technical terms in a letter to another.

It is dangerously easy, however, to fall into the habit of using our specialized terminology in communicating with people who are unfamiliar with it. These terms become so familiar to us that we tend to assume that others know what they mean. The result is bewilderment and, sometimes, a feeling on the part of the addressee that we are trying too hard to impress him with the profundity of our knowledge.

Unusual and Unnecessarily Long Words

Unusual, complex words are in a class with unnecessarily technical terms. We are more likely to be understood if we write "I shall try to find out the facts" instead of "I shall endeavor to ascertain the data," or if we write "After a careful review of all the facts, . . ." in place of "After a comprehensive and thorough appraisal of all the circumstances pertaining to your case, . . ."

The use of unnecessarily long, "ten-dollar words" also leads the reader to imagine that we are affected and pretentious. The reader is amused or becomes antagonistic; in any event his attention is distracted from our message.

Dangerous Words

The tone of a letter depends to a large extent upon the choice of words and phrases. Frequently a single word may suggest to the addressee that it is not the writer's sincere desire to assist him, as in the following sentence:

We found no information not previously considered which would cause us to change our former decision.

Substitute "enable" for "cause" and the tone of the letter is improved. Similarly, "We do not wish to offer you a position" might be better written "We are unable . . ." or in some cases "We regret that we are unable to . . ." Uncalled-for uncomplimentary references are occasionally found in letters:

You are not qualified for this position.
Your management and operation are unsatisfactory.

Expressions such as "you state," "you claim," and "you say" are usually undesirable because they imply doubt. Likewise, "your complaint," "your error," "your misunderstanding," "your neglect," "your failure," and similar phrases weaken the tone of a letter because they convey an unfavorable or unpleasant suggestion.

Vague and Inexact Expression

Both the clearness and the correctness of letters are reduced by the use of words which do not exactly express the thought. Careless or uninformed choice of words causes misunderstanding and unnecessary correspondence. Even when the inaccurate expression is not actually misleading, incorrect choice of words may give the addressee a poor impression of the writer and his organization. Unconscious humor, undesirable in that the reader laughs at rather than with us, sometimes results from careless use of words. For instance:

The problem of extending coverage to all employees, regardless of size, is not as simple as surface appearances indicate.

IV. Mastery of Words

A skilled craftsman masters the tools with which he works. The degree of mastery is a measure of his skill. Mastery of words makes it possible to produce a definite effect upon the mind of the reader and to obtain from him the response you desire.

Disraeli paid tribute to the power of words when he said, "With words we govern men." Letter writers, paraphrasing Disraeli's statement, may say: "With words we explain--we interpret--we convince--we move others to action."

Poverty of language is a handicap for which a correspondent must bear personal responsibility. By diligent effort, we can all become more expert in choosing words that express the exact shade of meaning we intend. We can increase the speed with which words come to our tongue, overcoming any tendency to grope or fumble. We can discover the meaning of useful words that are now strangers to us.

The Exact Meaning

Those of us who learned English as children are likely to take our words for granted. We have known them for so long that it seldom occurs to us to examine them carefully to make sure we really know what they do mean. We often use the commonest words with only a general idea of their meaning and only approximate correctness.

Can you, for example, define the differences among correct, accurate, exact, and precise? Among apt, likely, liable? Between evidence and proof? Resist and oppose? Verify and confirm? Modify and qualify? What is the difference between induce and persuade? Between cheap and inexpensive? Anxious and eager? Assure and insure? Finish and complete? Ridicule and deride? Continual and continuous? Claim and assert? Assume and presume?

Do ascertain and determine mean the same thing? Hinder and obstruct? Industrious and diligent? Haste and speed? Could you give reasonably exact definitions of advise, responsibility, authority, diction, administration, corroborate--and of hundreds of other familiar words you hear, see, or use every day?

Do you confuse your listeners by saying "The chief inferred that my work was slipshod" when you mean "implied"? Do you lessen the respect of discriminating addressees by misusing balance for remainder? By confusing fewer and less? Affect and effect? Do you think that transpire really means to occur or happen?

V. Constructing Effective Sentences

Clear Thinking Precedes Clear Expression

Almost everyone knows enough words to make himself understood; but many who command large and useful vocabularies continually baffle and confuse their readers by the way in which they arrange these words in sentences.

Avoid Long, Rambling, Shapeless Sentences

Long, sprawling sentences in which one idea is piled indiscriminately on top of another are always evidence of failure to think in an orderly, clear-cut manner. The best way of preventing this baffling type of sentence is to take a little time, before dictating, to formulate what we want to say. And in many cases, all that is necessary is to get into the habit of using periods more frequently.

Even though a sentence is structurally logical and correct, it may be too long to be readily grasped. It may be wise to divide the material into two or more sentences, lest you lose your breath and the reader his patience.

Show the Relation Between Thoughts

Clear expression demands that the relation between thoughts be shown unmistakably. The sentence structure should guide the reader by indicating that two ideas are equal, that they are being compared or contrasted, that one is subordinate to the other, that one is the cause or the result of the other, that one expresses a condition or a concession, or that an adverse idea is about to be expressed.

The relative importance of ideas is not the only relationship to be shown in helping the reader to get an immediate understanding of your message. The connectives used between clauses indicate relationship; they should be chosen with discrimination. Connectives are of two kinds, coordinating and subordinating. Coordinating connectives (and, moreover, but, and yet, or therefore, for example) join equal thoughts and enable you to express ideas of addition,

contrast, alternation, consequence, or explanation. Similarly, the subordinating connectives (although, because, since, when, where, as, who, if) enable you to show clearly and accurately the relationship of ideas. When these connectives are confused, meaning is confused.

Watch Your Word Order

For clarity and correctness, words must be so arranged in a sentence that there can be no doubt of the exact meaning intended. Use care to:

1. Place every modifier so that the reader connects it immediately with the word it modifies.

Ambiguous

We will send you the report that you requested tomorrow.

Mr. Avay only will visit the regional office at that time.

Better

We will send you tomorrow the report that you requested.

Mr. Avay will visit only the regional office at that time.

2. Fit together logically and grammatically related words and ideas.

Ambiguous

He operates a small grocery store together with his wife, from which he realizes a small profit.

Unlike this country, the English do not move about to any appreciable extent.

It has become common practice to disqualify a worker who leaves a job voluntarily for personal reasons from benefits in some States.

Better

Together with his wife, he operates a small grocery store, from which he realizes a small profit.

Unlike people in this country, the English do not move about to any appreciable extent.

When a worker leaves a job voluntarily, for personal reasons, it has become common practice in some States to disqualify him from benefits.

3. Connect action unmistakably with the agent of that action.

Ambiguous

Mr. Johnson discussed the proposal with Mr. Smith when he was in Washington last week.

After weighing all the facts in the case, the employee was given a rating of Fair.

Better

When Mr. Johnson was in Washington last week, he discussed the proposal with Mr. Smith.

After weighing all the facts in the case, the supervisor rated the employee Fair.

VI. Paragraphing for Clearness And Emphasis

The reader expects that a paragraph will convey one principal thought and that all the sentences of the paragraph will bear on this thought. The physical unit of typed material prepares him to find it a unit. To include in a paragraph sentences which do not contribute to one principal idea is confusing.

The central thought of a paragraph is frequently expressed in one sentence called the topic sentence. The topic sentence, which usually opens the paragraph but sometimes closes it, tells the reader what the paragraph as a whole is about. The topic sentence is not needed when the central thought of a paragraph is obvious. As a general rule, however, a topic sentence is a valuable aid to quick and easy reading.

Connection Between Ideas

Be sure that the sentences of a paragraph follow in a logical and natural order and that the reader can instantly see the connection between each sentence or idea and the next.

The logical connection between sentences may be made clear to the reader in three ways: (1) by repeating important words; (2) by using pronouns; (3) by using link words and phrases.

The first device is to repeat important words which join one sentence to the next, in this manner:

The purpose of unemployment insurance is to provide regular weekly payments for insured wage earners who are out of work. These payments help the worker and his family over times when wages stop.

Similarly useful are pronouns (he, they, this, etc.). To illustrate:

When the worker leaves no survivor entitled to monthly payments at the time of his death, lump-sum death payments are made. These may go to the widow, widower, child, grandchild, or parent, in the order named.

The English language is rich in "connectives," or link words and phrases, which enable the writer to pass smoothly and easily to a new thought and to show its relationship to the preceding thought. The following selection of connectives should remind you of many others. They are useful aids to clearness and emphasis, but in the interests of conciseness they should be used only when necessary.

although	furthermore	in fact
yet	hence	in this way
specifically	therefore	besides
conversely	accordingly	moreover
at least	for example	consequently
especially	for instance	in addition
surely	nevertheless	in contrast to
certainly		

VII. Correct Usage

Writers who punctuate intelligently develop what might be called a sense for placing the proper marks to indicate slight pauses in thought, abrupt stops, and parenthetical comments, as well as points of special emphasis. Frequently the correct use of these aids to clearness and more forceful expression depends on the writer's good judgment, rather than on his ability to recall certain rules. For example, a comma would not ordinarily be placed after the short introductory clause in the sentence: "While he was here we discussed that question." In the following sentence, however, a comma should be used to aid the reader to understand the meaning without rereading the sentence: "While he was dictating, a letter was delivered to him."

In business communications it is especially important that the reader be able to grasp the meaning at first glance. Punctuation which puzzles the reader and requires a second reading of the sentence may weaken a letter fully as much as involved sentence structure or the use of misleading phrases.

VIII. Five Aids To Effective Expression

To develop fluency in expression and to acquire skill in writing letters and reports:

1. Remember that the ability to write is developed as a result of much practice. Write often. Do not be discouraged if progress seems slow and difficult at first; at least 99 percent of those who become skilled writers must master certain essential principles and devote years of painstaking effort to eliminating the "rough spots." Regard every letter or report you write as an opportunity to increase your skill.
2. Read widely and study the methods of other writers. Books and magazine articles constitute excellent material for analysis. Observe the choice of words, the sentence structure, and the arrangement of ideas in each paragraph. Study the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Benjamin Franklin, William Dean Howells, Lord Chesterfield, Charles Lamb, Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Carl Sandburg, Bruce Barton, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. This list might be expanded indefinitely to include other acknowledged masters of clear and forceful expression.
3. Consult reference books on letter and report writing. Profit by the experiences and suggestions of recognized leaders. Discover your own writing difficulties and review the chapters which deal specifically with those problems.
4. Form the dictionary habit. Have your own copy of a standard dictionary (preferably an unabridged dictionary) and look up all unfamiliar words. Build a mental storehouse of synonyms and antonyms so that you will have a choice of words and can select the particular one which best expresses the exact meaning you intend to convey.
5. Use the letter appraisal chart. Ask yourself questions about your letters. Is the tone likely to bring about the desired response? Does the letter include only the essential facts? As you dictate, keep in mind the standards on the letter appraisal chart. Similarly review and appraise periodically carbon copies of letters you have written.

Ten Ways To Make It Hard For Your Stenographer To Serve You

1. Never read the incoming letter or plan your reply until the stenographer arrives. This gives her time to adjust her hairdo, to write amusing things about you in her little book, or even to think about broad economic problems, such as the manpower shortage.
2. Do not spell out technical terms or unfamiliar proper names, particularly in dictating to a new stenographer. To do so makes her job too simple, and when the work no longer challenges her she may lose interest and may even transfer to a war agency at a lower grade.
3. If you ordinarily speak distinctly, do your best to overcome this handicap. The simplest techniques, requiring no equipment, are to hold your hand over your mouth when speaking or merely to face away from the stenographer. If these techniques do not work, place a cigarette or pipe in your mouth. Nonsmokers may use a pencil or gum. In any event, be sure to slur over connecting words like prepositions and conjunctions.
4. Lower your voice and pause at any point except at the end of sentences and paragraphs. Otherwise the stenographer will have no opportunity to earn a plus on Element 18, "Resourcefulness," in her next efficiency rating.
5. Write out long memoranda and reports in longhand and then read them to the stenographer as rapidly as possible. She may not get much of it during the first year or two, but do not become discouraged. Only by such discipline and speed practice can she eventually qualify as a court reporter.
6. Make minor corrections in ink or at least with heavy pencil so that the entire page must be retyped. Since many of our typists are inexperienced, they need this additional practice.
7. Make it clear that she is not to make or suggest changes in letters, but be sure to hold her strictly accountable for incorrect English usage or involved sentence structure.
8. Never ask for extra copies until after the memorandum is typed; otherwise all copies can be made in one run.
9. Although experts differ regarding the best time of day for dictating, many find the late afternoon the most effective for breaking up car pools and interfering with domestic duties.
10. Never give the stenographer the subject of a memorandum. The practice of assigning accurate subjects makes life too easy for classifiers and searchers in the files unit and leads to shiftlessness. It may even enable them to find the memorandum later.